MENTAL HEALTH IN THE WORKPLACE:
PRIORITISING EMPLOYEE WELLBEING IN THE UK

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Mental health issues have become increasingly prevalent in the UK workforce, with 1 in 4 people experiencing a mental health problem each year[1]. In the financial services sector, where high-pressure environments and long working hours are commonplace, the problem is even more acute. According to a recent study, 52% of finance professionals have experienced poor mental health as a result of their job[2].

Despite this, mental health has historically been a taboo subject in the workplace. However, there has been a recent shift in attitudes towards mental health, with companies across the UK recognising the importance of creating a supportive work environment for their employees.

This article will discuss recent changes in UK mental health in different demographics, the benefits of prioritising mental health in the workplace, and ways in which individuals and companies can support themselves, colleagues and employees with their mental health.

Recent Changes in UK Mental Health

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a significant impact on mental health in the UK, with many people struggling with anxiety, depression and other mental health issues as a result of the pandemic. According to research, over half of UK adults (53%) said that their mental health worsened as a result of the pandemic[3]. In addition to this, 2022 saw countless hurdles for the mortgage industry, a recent survey revealed 48% of mortgage professionals found October-December 2022 the most stressful months of the year,[4] signalling that the chaos caused from the mini-budget was extremely challenging for our sector.

One demographic that has experienced a rise in mental health issues is young people. According to the NHS Digital survey, 18% of children aged between 7 and 16 experienced at least one mental disorder, with this rising to 22% for young people aged 17 to 24. This demographic has been particularly affected by issues such as social media pressure, bullying and academic pressures.

Another demographic that has experienced an increase in mental health issues is men. Traditionally, men have been less likely to discuss their mental health or seek help, but this is changing. According to the Men's Health Forum, men are three times more likely to die by suicide than women. The suicide rate for men in the UK has been declining slowly since 1981, indicating that the conversation around mental health for men is slowly becoming more open[4]. Kensington Mortgages recently launched a "Men's Sharing Forum" for our male colleagues, providing a safe space where colleagues can meet others in the business and talk openly about challenges. This initiative has been launched as we know some men can be reluctant to talk to others about their feelings or concerns, which can lead to the bottling up of emotions which can cause isolation and worsen mental health.

Finally, job role can also impact mental health. The financial services industry, for example, has traditionally been associated with high stress levels, long hours, and a competitive culture. As a result, people in this industry may be more likely to experience mental health issues such as anxiety and depression. According to recent data from Champion Health, 9% of employees are currently experiencing thoughts of suicide or self-harm and employees experiencing financial stress are twice as likely to experience thoughts of suicide or self-harm. Since the pandemic, financial services workers were said to be most likely to see their mental health negatively affected by the pandemic with over 52% stating their mental health had worsened in the last year [2].

However, there has also been a shift in attitudes towards mental health, with individuals becoming more open about their mental health struggles and companies recognising the importance of supporting their employees' mental health. For example, the UK government launched several initiatives designed to create a supportive culture, provide employees with access to mental health support, and reduce stigma. The mortgage industry specifically has responded to the mental health topic and the Mortgage Industry Mental Health Charter has been gaining traction in recent months with many companies, including Kensington Mortgages, signing up to their mental health pledge. The Industry of Mortgage Lenders Association and the Association of Mortgage Intermediaries has also partnered together on their website: Working In Mortgages - which aims to make the mortgage industry more inclusive for all. The stigma surrounding mental health in the workplace is slowly being addressed, and companies are becoming more aware of the importance of supporting employees in this area.

Kensington Mortgages specifically has identified a rise in calls from vulnerable and/or suicidal customers, and we have invested in specific training on how to effectively handle such calls as well as the emotional response to taking such a call. All our Servicing agents have received this training which was provided by Samaritans, and the feedback from those attending has been consistently positive with many commenting how their confidence has increased as a result.

The Importance of Mental Health in the Workplace

Mental health in the workplace is a critical issue that affects individuals, companies, and society as a whole. Recent data has highlighted the significant impact that mental health problems have on the UK workforce. In fact, 86% of organisations in the UK finance industry experienced an increase in demand for mental health support in 2021, the highest among the sectors surveyed[5]. In the mortgage sector specifically, 58% of mortgage professionals confirm that their company has been participating in mental health initiatives, which is a 4% increase in the Mortgage Mental Health Charter's 2022 report. According to a survey conducted by Mind, a mental health charity, 1 in 6 people experience mental health problems in the workplace, which is almost 15% of the workforce. This highlights the prevalence of mental health issues in the workplace, which affects all sectors, including the finance industry.

Moreover, poor workplace mental health is expensive for companies and costs UK employers around £56 billion every year, with a 25% increase since 2019[5]. This is mainly due to the cost of sickness absence and presenteeism (employees who come to work but are not productive due to poor mental health). For instance, employees take around 18 days off a year to deal with stress, depression, or anxiety, while taking around 10 days for injuries, 17 days for physical ill-health, and 15 days for musculoskeletal disorders. This shows how mental health problems in the workplace can lead to significant costs and disruptions for businesses.

Nearly half (48%) of employees say their mental wellbeing declined in 2022, and 28% said they are miserable in their workplace. This is an alarming trend that needs to be addressed to improve the well-being of employees and the productivity of companies[5].

Research has also shown that happier employees are 13% more productive. This highlights the importance of mental health in the workplace and the benefits to companies who get this right[5].

Prioritising mental health in the workplace not only benefits employees but also has positive impacts on businesses. Companies that prioritise mental health are more likely to have higher levels of employee engagement, lower rates of absenteeism and presenteeism, and increased productivity.

Furthermore, businesses that invest in mental health support for their employees are likely to attract and retain talent. Employees are more likely to stay with a company that supports their mental health and wellbeing, and businesses that prioritise mental health are more likely to attract talented individuals who value a supportive work environment.

Ways to Support Mental Health in the Workplace

There are several ways in which individuals and companies can support their own mental health and that of their colleagues and employees. Firstly, companies should prioritise creating a supportive work culture that promotes open communication about mental health. This can involve providing employees with access to mental health support and training managers to recognise the signs of poor mental health in their teams.

Companies should also prioritise flexible working arrangements to support their employees' work-life balance. This can include offering flexible working hours, remote working options and employee benefits which can be used to support mental well-being.

By normalising conversations around mental health within a company its likely this will encourage the right type of engagement from employees. Some examples of this could be embedding well-being checks within one-to-ones, leading by example and not sending emails outside of business hours that do not need to be actioned immediately and educating and raising awareness both internally and externally.

To highlight one example, Kensington Mortgages has recently introduced Mental Health First Aiders. We trained a number of employees to allow colleagues immediate access to someone when perhaps they have dealt with an emotional or stressful situation or completed a difficult or triggering call. This training is aimed to signpost and encourage our colleagues to reach out if they need support and to build confidence for managers and the Mental Health First Aiders in discussing mental health concerns.

Individuals can also take steps to prioritise their own mental health in the workplace. This can involve setting boundaries around work hours, taking regular breaks to recharge and giving yourself 'meeting free time' in your calendar. It is also important for individuals to seek support when they need it, whether that involves speaking to a manager, accessing mental health support services, or speaking to friends and family. There are several support numbers available throughout the UK, please refer to the bottom of the article for ways you can reach out if you need support for your own mental health or if you need support in helping someone close to you.

In summary, mental health issues are affecting a range of demographics in the UK, and companies need to take these changes into consideration when developing their mental health strategies. By recognising the different needs of different groups, companies can create a more inclusive and supportive work environment.

I believe Mental Health is a hugely important topic for both individuals and our industry and it will continue to be significant in the future too. While there is still a long way to go in terms of creating a completely supportive work environment for all employees, there has been progress in recent years towards recognising the importance of mental health in the workplace. Since the pandemic 46% of mortgage professionals say their workplace has been taking steps to improve mental health support on their companies.[6]

Companies that prioritise mental health are likely to have happier, healthier, and more productive employees, and individuals who prioritise their own mental health are likely to be more successful and fulfilled in their careers. By working together to prioritise mental health in the workplace, we can create a more supportive industry for all.

SUPPORT GROUPS

Samaritans

To talk about anything that is upsetting you, you can contact Samaritans 24 hours a day, 365 days a year. You can call **116 123** (free from any phone), email jo@samaritans.org or visit some branches in person. You can also call the Samaritans Welsh Language Line on **0808 164 0123** (7pm–11pm every day).

SANEline

If you're experiencing a mental health problem or supporting someone else, you can call SANEline on **0300 304 7000** (4.30pm–10.30pm every day).

National Suicide Prevention Helpline UK

Offers a supportive listening service to anyone with thoughts of suicide. You can call the National Suicide Prevention Helpline UK on **0800 689 5652** (6pm–3:30am every day).

Campaign Against Living Miserably (CALM)

You can call the CALM on **0800 58 58 58** (5pm–midnight every day) if you are struggling and need to talk. Or if you prefer not to speak on the phone, you could try the CALM webchat service.

Shout

If you would **prefer not to talk** but want some mental health support, you could **text SHOUT to 85258**. Shout offers a confidential 24/7 text service providing support if you are in crisis and need immediate help.

The Mix

If you're **under 25**, you can call The Mix on **0808 808 4994** (3pm–midnight every day), request support by email using this form on The Mix website or use their crisis text messenger service.

Papyrus HOPELINEUK

f you're **under 35** and struggling with suicidal feelings, or concerned about a young person who might be struggling, you can call Papyrus HOPELINEUK on **0800 068 4141** (weekdays 10am-10pm, weekends 2pm-10pm and bank holidays 2pm–10pm), email pat@papyrus-uk.org or text **07786 209 697**.

Switchboard

If you identify as **gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgender**, you can call Switchboard on **0300 330 0630** (10am–10pm every day), email chris@switchboard.lgbt or use their webchat service. Phone operators all identify as LGBT+.

[1] https://www.mind.org.uk/information-support/types-of-mental-health-problems/statistics-and-facts-about-mental-health/how-common-are-mental-health-problems/

[2] https://www.westfieldhealth.com/resources/coping-with-covid

[3] https://www.mind.org.uk/media-a/5929/the-mental-health-emergency_a4_final.pdf

[4] https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/cbp-7749/

[5] https://www.spill.chat/mental-health-statistics/workplace-mental-health-statistics

[6] https://mimhc.co.uk/mimhc-mental-health-wellbeing-survey-report-2023/

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